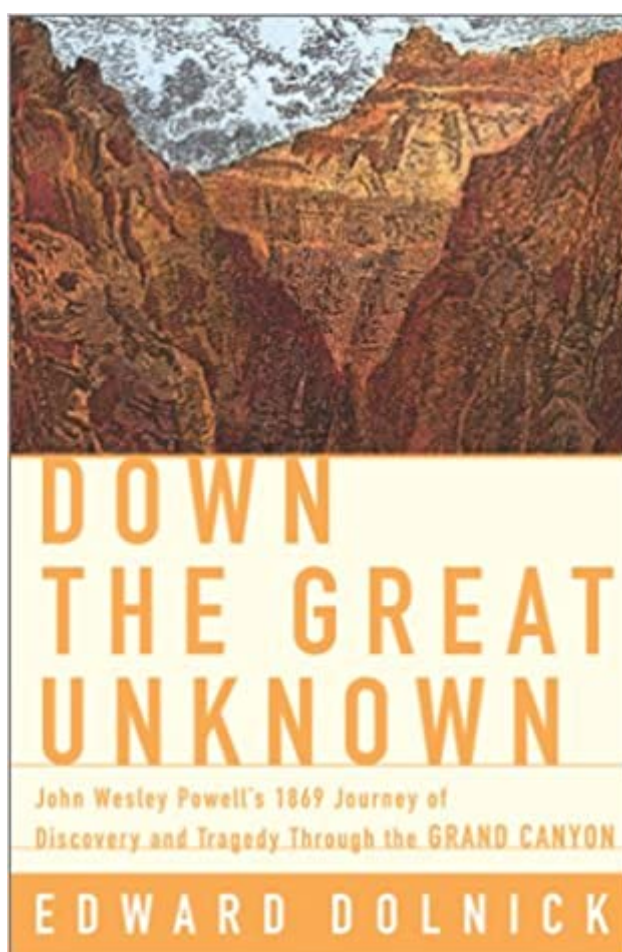


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# Down The Great Unknown: John Wesley Powell's 1869 Journey Of Discovery And Tragedy Through The Grand Canyon



## Synopsis

Drawing on rarely examined diaries and journals, *Down the Great Unknown* is the first book to tell the full, dramatic story of the Powell expedition. On May 24, 1869 a one-armed Civil War veteran, John Wesley Powell and a ragtag band of nine mountain men embarked on the last great quest in the American West. The Grand Canyon, not explored before, was as mysterious as Atlantis and as perilous. The ten men set out from Green River Station, Wyoming Territory down the Colorado in four wooden rowboats. Ninety-nine days later, six half-starved wretches came ashore near Callville, Arizona. Lewis and Clark opened the West in 1803, six decades later Powell and his scruffy band aimed to resolve the West's last mystery. A brilliant narrative, a thrilling journey, a cast of memorable heroes—all these mark *Down the Great Unknown*, the true story of the last epic adventure on American soil.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Edward Dolnick's *Down the Great Unknown* depicts the "last epic journey on American soil," John Wesley Powell's exploration of the Grand Canyon and the fulminating, carnivorous Colorado River. The book, a model of precision, clarity, and serene passion, outshines, arguably, its bestselling brother-volume, Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*. On May 24, 1869, Powell, an ambitious, autocratic, one-armed Civil War veteran and amateur scientist, and a casually recruited crew of nine--without a lick of white water experience--embarked from an obscure railroad stop in the Wyoming Territory to travel through a region "scarcely better known than Atlantis." Ninety-nine days,

1,000 miles and nearly 500 rapids later, six of the men came ashore in Arizona--the first humans to run the waters of the Grand Canyon. Dolnick tells this story of courage, naiveté, hardship, and petty squabbling simply and authoritatively using entries from the men's journals, deft overviews (we always know where we are), and short science, history, and psychology lessons, as well as the prodigious knowledge of present-day river runners and his own first-hand observations. His prose carries the day: Powell looks like a "stick of beef jerky adorned with whiskers," the boats are "walnut shells," which in rapids are little better than "ladybugs caught in a hose's blast" or "drunks trying to negotiate a revolving door," while the river is a "taunting bully," a "colossal mugger," a "sumo wrestler smothering a kitten," and a notable rock formation looks like what might happen if "Edward Gorey had designed the Bat Cave." Down the Great Unknown brushes against perfection. This is history written as it should be--and too rarely is: enthusiastic, rigorous, painterly, gloriously free of both pedantry and hyperbole. --H. O'Billovitch

Powell led his band of stalwart trappers and ex-soldiers down the Green River in Wyoming Territory, heading for the last bit of terra incognita in the U.S.: the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon. The expedition had plenty of supplies, but the wrong type of boats for shooting rapids. Moreover, their inexperience with rapids cost them one of the boats and many provisions. There was little game to supplement their rapidly dwindling food supply. And being the first to chart the river, they didn't know what lay beyond each twist. These handicaps, along with deadly river rocks, soaring canyon walls and one-armed Powell's impressive feat of scaling them to measure their height, make for a remarkable journey. Unfortunately, Dolnick does the story a disservice in overwriting the expedition's slower moments. He frequently overexplains, and he never meets a simile he doesn't like. Every description, no matter how effective, is carried too far, suggesting Dolnick doesn't trust his story or his readers: "rapids... do not murmur. They rumble. They roar. They crash. The sound evokes a thunderstorm just overhead, a jet skimming the ground, a runaway train.... The message is worse than the sound itself the roar of a rapid is a proclamation of danger as clear as a giant's bellowed curse in a fairy tale." After passages like that, readers may want to jump ship, or like Powell's band, they can struggle through and emerge battered but illuminated. Photos and illus. (Oct. 2)Forecast: Will a 15-city NPR campaign, six-city author tour and big-time advertising help the story trump the writing? Yes. The adventure is that good.Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

This is an excellent book that tells the story of John Wesley Powell's 1869 river trip through the

Grand Canyon. It relies on primary source documents, such as diaries and notes taken by the adventurers. The author also interviewed modern adventurers who have taken boat trips through the dangerous rapids of the Colorado River. Because the author took the time to really learn about and understand the river, the book is highly informative. I learned a great deal about the Colorado River, the canyons, the rocks, and the difficulties faced by Powell and his colleagues. Powell was also a skilled climber even though he had lost an arm at the battle of Shiloh in the Civil War. In sum, this is a great history book that does a wonderful job of helping the reader visualize and understand the challenges that Powell and his men faced.

I really wanted to like this book, I really did! I was expecting a rip-roaring exploration adventure and unfortunately got a Green River and Colorado River rafting guide. 20% of the way through the book I got tired of the \*very\* detailed descriptions of rapids (they are caused by rocks and water is churning and strong). It's a shame too because bits and pieces of this book were great. I loved the opening context about previous expeditions and I enjoyed the review of Powell's civil war experience. If only we could have gotten more fun stories like this for the other characters in the crew, I would have been a happy camper. Again, I only made it through 20% of the book, so maybe this was covered? Unfortunately I went into a coma before I could get there. :(

This book is about more than a Civil War hero, or the group of totally inexperienced men invited along on his quest. This book is about courage, survival and camaraderie, it's about fear, the unknown and what a group of men did to map, just barely, the wild and raging Colorado River and the "Grand Canyon" it ran through. This is a great adventure story, a story of discovery and tragedy. I found it hard to put down. I would recommend it to anyone interested in history, adventure or the great So. West. These guys were tough...

Using his background as a journalist, Dolnick, not on a story over one hundred and thirty years old, breathes new life into the story of John Wesley Powell by focusing his pen almost exclusively on the perils of the Colorado River Exploring Expedition. Dolnick, as the review mentions, is free of pedantry and conveys Powell's trip as if to a buddy encamped on the shores of the Colorado. He purposefully sucks the reader into the reality of the canyons with witticisms such as the one describing Powell's choice of Whitehall boats for the expedition, "now he [Powell] was headed into a fire wearing a gasoline suit." In this respect, Dolnick successfully creates a bridge for the reader between the 21st and 19th centuries, which vividly enliven an important American historical event.

Should one wish to learn a great deal about the life of John Wesley Powell, this is not the book. This is the Patton or Spirit of St. Louis, of books, not the Gandhi or Citizen Kane. The lens is centered on a specific event that shaped a man as much as it shaped a nation, and with this perspective, it succeeds. Interestingly, and through no fault of Dolnick's, the book inherits and conveys upon the reader certain undesirable characteristics of its subject matter as the book progresses. Repetition sets in as the men scuttle canyon after canyon with no end in sight. As their bodies grow wan from lack of food, so their powers for description wane. The reader is drawn into their misery and desperation of the watery marathon and reads all the faster to escape with the expedition. As contradictory as it may seem, it is a credit to the writer and a testament to the men that last few chapters become increasingly difficult due to this reflexive, involuntary, empathetic reader response. Three negative points, if minor, regarding Dolnick's work: He fails to discuss the Rainbow Bridge near Glen Canyon, only one of the most incredible rock formations in all of North America, if not the world. In his notes, Dolnick claims to have stuck closely to the accounts of the men's journals, so is it possible, however unlikely, that none mentioned this glorious natural wonder? Secondly, Dolnick claims the bodies of the Howlands and Dunns "have never been found." According to historian Donald Worster, there is strong circumstantial evidence to the contrary. In fact, Worster's work, *A River Running West: The Life Of John Wesley Powell*, refers to correspondence involving Major Powell, which states as much. To be fair, however, Dolnick's research was not centered on post-expedition history. Finally, Dolnick's notes are inconveniently placed at the back of the book and arranged in such a manner as to make it terribly difficult to follow while reading. It is, however, a minor subtraction from an otherwise excellent historical narrative.

I expected the book to have great outtakes from journals and to re-tell amazing escapades. I wasn't expecting the book to be so entertaining and funny. I also didn't know that Powell climbed out of the canyon nearly every day in order to map their route and scan the rapids ahead, then climbed back down to continue the journey. Epic. Heroic. Inspirational. Interwoven into the Powell expedition narrative are quotes from modern river-runners and great descriptions of the scenery. Did I just read the best book of 2011? It's possible.

Being able to relate to many of the locations and sites in the canyon was fun and brought back memories. The book is mostly well written and moves along well at a few times may get a little wordy or venture off but quickly returns. It is a book you can put down and pick up later without feeling lost as it flows well. If you like an adventure or have ever seen the canyon I recommend it.

Although I felt like this book dragged a little in some places, it was overall very engaging. I read it in anticipation of my own tour down the grand canyon- it was extremely cool to read about the misadventures of these brave men, specifically knowing I would be retracing their steps (in comfort!). The best part of the book for me was how the author compared the different records of several crew members to give a more balanced impression of the whole expedition. All in all, if you enjoy outdoor adventure--either in person or from your armchair--this is a solid read.

Great adventure reading of a true story. Unbelievable but it has to be accepted as true.

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